

From Emotions to Advocacy

Mistakes People Make – Parents

by Robert K. Crabtree

Because the stakes are so high, it is difficult for parents of children with special educational needs to advocate calmly and objectively for the educational and related services their children need.

Here are some common mistakes that undermine parents' ability to obtain appropriate services:

1. Viewing the special education process as the moral equivalent of war, fighting that war with a "scorched earth" approach, and letting personal animosity toward administrators and/or teachers distort one's judgment about what is best for the child and what is realistic to accept;
2. The opposite mistake trusting administrators and teachers too uncritically; assuming that if they are "nice" they are also competent and interested in serving the child's best interest; not questioning slow, or nonexistent progress as long as the child, parent and teacher have a cordial relationship;
3. Taking an "all or nothing" approach, waiting too long before getting good independent advice, then insisting on instant delivery of needed services rather than steady progress toward the right program;
4. Failing to understand that the special education process sometimes requires that the parent educate the child's special education team about the child's disabilities and needs (the school system may not be willfully refusing to meet the child's needs; they may simply not understand those needs);
5. Not trying a program or added services, even on a temporary basis, when they are offered by the school system -- holding out for an alternative program only to have a hearing officer decide the untried program might have worked;
6. Attempting to "micro-manage" the details of a child's life in school; even if parents don't feel things are going well, their efforts to control the child's day usually backfire when the hearing officer concludes that the parents were over-protective and didn't let the school professionals do their job;
7. Focusing on minor, nonprejudicial procedural missteps by the school (e.g., the parent who already knows her rights who says, "Aha! Gotcha! School district forgot to give me the rights brochure!") instead of focusing on the substantial issues in the case;
8. Not consenting to school evaluations;
9. Choosing the wrong independent evaluators, e.g., "hired guns" who only say what the parents want them to say, and have a reputation for doing so; those who will not follow through by observing programs, attending team meetings, etc.; those who do not have training or experience to evaluate a child like yours;
10. Not providing copies of independent evaluations to the school, or not providing them in a timely way;
11. Not responding in a timely way to proposed IEPs;
12. Not documenting issues with the school; not sending letters to confirm agreements with the school or to record important conversations with school personnel; and
13. Seeing the school system as a monolith ("All those teachers are incompetent [or wonderful!]"); failing to look carefully at alternatives within the system for this year and at next year's teacher possibilities.